

THE ART ACADEMY WITHOUT WALLS

PHOTOGRAPHY IN CONTEXT



SIMON READ

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Photography in Context



Nezas Nyirenda, Market 1.

**A Photographic Workshop for Artists in Zambia
The Visual Arts Council. Lusaka. 2004**

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Nezias Nyirenda, Market 2.

Introduction:

The first photographic workshop that I conducted at the Henry Tayali Visual Arts Centre in Lusaka was over a two week long period in November 2000. This was called “Photography as a Fine Art Tool” and the aim was to deliver an introduction to the ways in which photography may be used as a component of Fine Art Practice, teach basic workshop skills around a new camera and darkroom facility and encourage the production of an independent body of work from the team of participants. This led to an exhibition of work, which opened on the final day of the project.

During the course of this workshop, I became acutely aware that photography is fundamentally a visual language and that it would be irresponsible to presuppose the way in which the visual arts community might use it. I realised that in spite of the universality of the medium, the exchange of information upon its’ use is determined to a large extent by whichever donor nation happens to be running the course. It was with some discomfort I realised that in aiming to help, we could put ourselves in the position of writing the developing culture of third world nations according to our own terms of reference and imposing our perception of what it should become.

Therefore when it came to planning a more advanced facility and a new workshop session, I suggested that we would explore in a much more consistent way the idea that photography is a language and that it is a means by which artists might discover their own perceptions of culture. I wanted them to tell me about their lives and I saw my role as that of providing a temporary context, using models from contemporary visual art as an indicator of the scope of what might be tackled, not to create role models.



Nezias Nyirenda, Market 3.

The Facility:

The aim was to enhance the existing facility with the emphasis upon sustainability:

With this in mind and after a great deal of debate we decided to supply a sophisticated digital facility with the capability of working at high resolution and printing up to A3 format.

We agreed to supply a basic colour print unit for the darkroom, but decided that anything more sophisticated would become a burden to run, which, to make it worthwhile, would have to be operated as a business and may not be in the interests of the guiding principles of VAC.

With a view to enhancing the capability to document artist's work, we supplied a portable flash unit, a demountable backdrop and a good quality medium format camera. A basic studio facility is essential for a flexible photographic facility and we considered it as completing the basic resource.

Apart from further associated equipment and textbooks, we supplied enough materials to run the resource on all levels for the duration of the workshop, plus a large surplus as a start to make the facility sustainable into the future.



Javan Phiri, Simon Makandawire.

Form:

The number of participants this workshop aimed at was notionally twenty; in fact for one reason or another we had fourteen, these being:

Nezias Nyirenda
Gift Syakwasia
Emmanuel Kapotwe
Andrew Mwananshiku
Gordon Shamulenge
Levy Chinyimba
Victor Mwakalombe
Trudy Kapapula
Alumedi Maonde
Saviour Mukopa
Simon Makandawire
Nsofwa Bowa
Yost Kalasa
Geoffrey Phiri

To make it practicable, I received overall coordinating assistance from the Visual Arts Council Manager, Therica Miyanadeniya and her team in the office. Technical support was

given by Dan Lwando; who has overall responsibility for the darkroom and cameras, Javan Phiri; who supervised the digital facility and Leonard Musabule; who conducted introductions to flash and studio procedures.

The comprehensive delivery of technical inductions would have been impossible for me to carry out unaided and since we were committed to a continuing fund of knowledge after my departure, a spirit of collaboration with the technical team was essential. Even with this provision, the aim to deliver introductions to such a range of equipment and ensure a basic photographic capability for each participant within the scope of a short course, was still extremely ambitious. With this in mind I proposed the project be extended from the normal two weeks duration to three weeks.



Javan Phiri, Trudy Kapapula

Week 1.

The timetable for the first week was to run basic introductions, discuss and agree the project brief with the participants and deliver a series of lecture/ seminars on the basis of one per day over six days. The order and the themes I covered in the lectures were:

Monday. "Chasing the Moment"; here we explored the inherent desire in western art to stop a moment in time and examine it. Photography for the first time allowed what could only previously be imagined, now be seen to happen.

Tuesday. "Looking at the Land"; an exploration of the way in which a cultural perception is reflected in the way it looks at landscape.

Wednesday. "Portraits"; being about the way in which our terms of reference for how we think about portrait are indexed by the context and intention of both photographer and viewer.

Thursday. "Allegories"; an examination of the ways in which a variety of artist/photographers have built narrative into single images, with reference to historical traditions of narrative painting.

Friday. “Constructed Stories”; a look at the ways in which the formal and technical language of photographic process has been exploited by artists to find fresh approaches to narrative.

Saturday. A short presentation of a selection from my own work.

The lectures proved to be an effective point of departure for discussion ranging from issues of what is a correct subject for art; whether, for example, it was blasphemy to directly engage discussions of sexuality, to even whether photography itself may be considered to be art. These discussions were lively and served to prompt a great deal of the work carried out over the following two weeks. Further to this, they served to reinforce for me the understanding that in order that it is to become useful, the relevance of any process or medium has to be realised by the user.

Javan Phiri, Emmanuel Kapote.



Week 2.

Once the lecture series had been completed, my aim for the second week was that we should concentrate upon gathering experience in different processes and media in the context of a series of agreed themes. I was anxious to ensure that by rotating access to the resource, all of the participants had adequate exposure to a wide range of possibility. The themes I identified broadly correspond to the subjects of the lectures and are discussed more fully in the following section “Content”.

From this point I shifted my function to that of facilitator and catalyst, holding tutorials and giving specialist input where appropriate.

Week 3.

The intention for the third week was to emphasise the production of a technically accomplished and coherent body of work. This was formally presented as an exhibition at the end of the week to coincide with a brief ceremony to award certificates to all of the participants.

The exhibition was an essential outcome of the workshop. It also provided an opportunity to reflect publicly upon the ways in which photography might be exploited by the visual arts community.



Emmanuel Kapote Stones 7.



Emmanuel Kapote, Stones 9.

Content:

During the first workshop, “Photography as a Fine Arts Tool”, it struck me that the prescribed use of a facility should not be constrained by assumptions imported from a western metropolitan context. Indeed if the resource we supply is to be used with any kind of intensity, it has to be seen to be applicable to an African context. I wanted to be able to work outwards from supplying a language, to discussing how in various other contexts that language is used and the importance of having a voice.

With this in mind, my proposal was that I would invite the participants to reflect through photography upon their way of life and to simplify matters, I broke this down to a number of broad categories with close links to the initial lecture series. Being very broad, the categories I proposed could never be contained but, taken together, they would cover a good range of approach. My suggestions were that we should look at the land, how it is perceived in a rural and urban context, the way in which people use it, their patterns of work and how they impact upon the landscape, in particular on the fringe where city and country meet. How do people get around, what are recent developments and what is the legacy of the colonial system? What are the impacts of international aid projects in the region? In a more contemplative way, I suggested that there could be scope to looking afresh at genres enshrined in photography such as portrait and still life with a mind to providing an opportunity to explore the potential of the studio flash facility.

Above all I hoped that I could encourage an intelligent use of the medium and some thoughtful images. To this end I laid an emphasis upon thinking less about what constitutes a “good shot” and concentrating more upon exploring with a camera, where communication is the first concern.



Emmanuel Kapote, Stones 1.

Outcomes:

It was extremely rewarding to receive the wholehearted enthusiasm of the group and I was intrigued that, unbidden, some very real concerns were articulated; foremost amongst these was very vivid documentation of living and working conditions as well as the appalling state of care and cleanliness in the city environment. From this I have the impression that there is huge potential for what artists may do with photography and how they may, in a very profound way, affect their culture.

I considered it fundamental to my involvement in this project that I should devote attention to the matters of continuity and sustainability: both of these have to be rooted in a sound management plan; I shared the concern voiced that, once the participants disperse, it is unlikely that they will be able to take advantage of an equivalent level of resource unless they return to Lusaka to do so. Given that their practice is predominantly determined by established markets, photographic practice is unlikely to develop in a substantial way

unless a context is identified for it to do so. Continuity depends primarily upon the presence of incentives to use and extend newly learned skills, such as commissions to make photographic commentary from organisations active in Zambia.



Emmanuel Kapote, Neziland.

The challenge of how to make the resource realistically accessible in the regions has to be met. A residential unit for artists visiting Lusaka to use the technical resource would be a huge benefit. There needs to be a considerable consciousness raising exercise undertaken by VAC under the guidance of the photographic unit/club. Real promotion would be an advantage and it occurs to me that the website would be an excellent starting point as is the potential to set up a database of artist's images at VAC.

Sustainability has become a mantra for all of these projects. Realistically speaking, having brought the resource up to a good professional standard, this exercise is not likely to be repeated. Therefore I considered it essential that before leaving, I should satisfy myself that a sensible management plan is feasible. Certainly there is no shortage of customers for the facility, but there has to be some balance achieved between a business which makes a profit and a facility that pays it's way. One problem is that a great many artists have been allowed to use the equipment whilst not keeping their side of the bargain. This is embarrassing for the technical staff, who end up trying to police it without falling out with their friends. In the long run this is not workable. Thought must be given to what is affordable for individual artists and how to guarantee that the resource is indeed renewable.

For my part I will make every effort to promote the artists from my position in the UK and am happy to explore initiatives for them where possible.



Nezias Nyirenda, Soweto garbage.



Conclusions:

I have become very impressed by the innate practical skills of the artists I have been working with and have discovered that they tend to be quick learners when introduced to new disciplines. Like anything else, in order that these skills are kept up they have to be practised and there must be outlets. In spite of the fact that I believe that photographic skills are essential, further developments rely upon the continuing metamorphosis of what is meant by the word “artist” within a developing culture.

To me this could mean that the support base shifts from direct funding to indirect encouragement of initiatives and the consolidation of infrastructures.

As ever I regard it a privilege and a pleasure to be involved in the Art Academy Without Walls initiative and wish it all success with future projects.



Nsofwa Bowa, Work.

Further Work:

Although I could not possibly do justice to the sheer volume of high quality work made by the participants over the duration of the workshop, what follows is a range of the issues and ideas tackled by them.

Simon Read, February 2005.



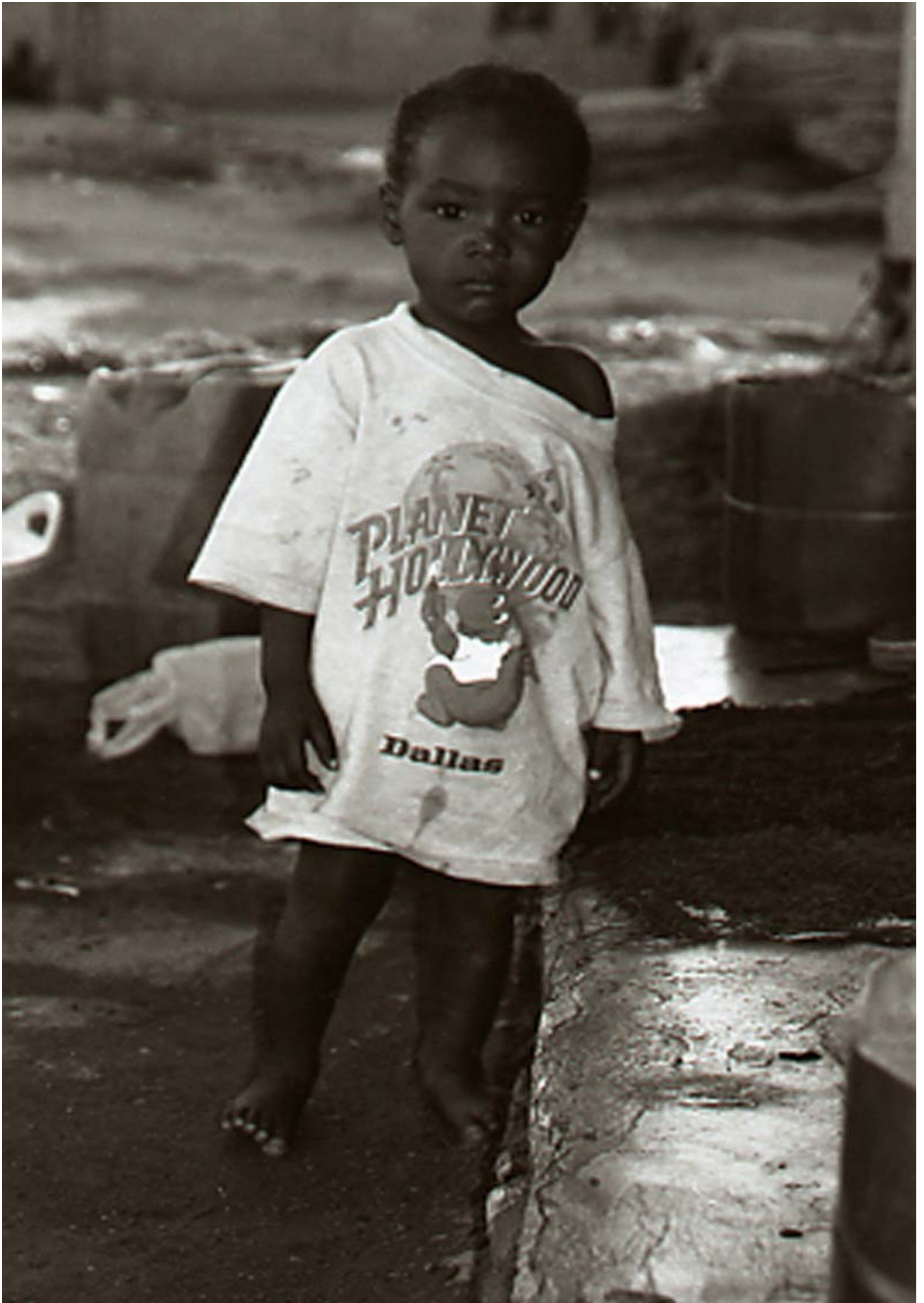
Victor Mwakalombe, Football 1.



Victor Mwakalombe, Football 2.



Victor Mwakalombe, Boys.



Victor Mwakalombe,



Victor Mwakalombe, Boy.



*Victor Mwakalombe
Girl with a container.*



Simon Mkwandawire, For Sale.



Simon Mkwandawire, Sold.



Saviour Mukopa, Church Toilet.



Saviour Mukopa, Ditch.



Gift Syakwasia, Kamugaiz na wilibala.



Syakwasia, Man on a bicycle.

Gift



Andrew Mwananshiku, Landscape.



Victor Mwakalombe, Land.



Nsofwa Bowa, Defiled Land.



Emmanuel Kapote, Landscape 8.



Emmanuel Kapote, Mwumba Cave



Andrew Mwananshiku, Nice Shot.



Gordon Shamulenge, Transport



Gordon Shamulenge, Wheelbarrows.



Levy Chinyimba, Cargo.



Simon Mkandawire, Azimai.



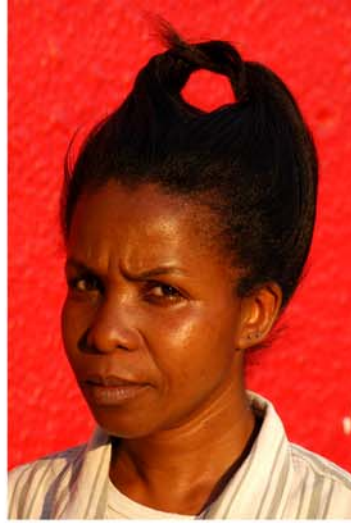
Saviour Mukopa, Nyelele.



Andrew Mwananshiku, Burden.

Victor Mwakalombe, Fire.





Gift Syakwasia, Hair.



Yost Kalasa, Hands



Simon Mkandawire, Nshawa.



Trudy Kapapula, Kitchen.



Trudy Kapapula, Waste



Javan Phiri, Meal.